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Thoughts on files

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Abstract

With the benefit of an anthropological attention to the importance of 'things' and the relations between ourselves and things ('artefacts'), this paper gives attention to the Social Work File. Despite the rise of electronic recording, social work archives remain full of thousands of files that are increasingly accessed, especially by those who have been in care, and physical file-keeping remains a regular feature of practice. There is already a body of literature relating to the information in social work files, however this paper shifts the focus from this to the nature and role of the File itself. 'Hidden in plain sight' but laden with meaning and capacity, I identify the little we know already about the file. The various ways files and their authors and subjects, can interact are explored together with the file's symbolic properties and the power held by the file's owner, and the ability of the file to 'other' its subject. Whilst we understand that the practice shapes the file, how might the file shape practice?

Keywords

Social work practice, othering, records, files, the Anthropology of Things

Introduction

I had been mulling over files and their role in the world of social workers for a while when this journal's call for contributions to a special issue on Social Work and Anthropology landed in my inbox. This has inspired me to better frame my concerns. What follows is an effort by someone who is not an anthropologist nor one who has had any training in anthropology to examine a little-discussed item in

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the world of social workers. Despite being as ubiquitous as the 'phone or diary, and taken for granted everywhere in social work practice, the file remains something of a black box. I don't mean the written information that is usually taken to be the contents of the file, I mean the file itself. This paper theorizes the role of the file, drawing both on personal experience and on various theoretical perspectives and empirical papers from a wealth of other disciplines such as sociology; however, anthropological texts were the most instructive in taking forward my early thoughts.

The discipline of Anthropology is fundamentally about deepening our understandings and knowledge of the people of the world, the activities in which they engage and, for the purposes of this paper, the actual things (big and small) which people use during these activities. This paper begins with the anthropological touchstones used to sharpen my thinking and reviews the little we already know relating to anthropology's contribution to understanding social work. Whilst acknowledging the rise of electronic files, the paper draws attention to the hundreds of thousands of files that social workers work with and will continue to for many years and gives the example of files of children who have been in care. The various 'properties'; of the file are also examined, including the choices of contents and even how these are arranged. Here the classic anthropological maxim of 'making the strange familiar and the familiar strange' is applied to making the file 'strange' – and, by being aware of the power of the file, may help us practice better.

This paper is also as much about the writer's professional lifetime spent in social work surrounded by hundreds of files (and in the knowledge that somewhere in one of the London boroughs there is a social work file on myself). My current contact with files is in my work with an after-adoption agency that specialises in reuniting adopted people and birthparents. This agency has also recently expanded its work to include assisting survivors of historic abuse in accessing and reading their files. During my contact with this agency, I have witnessed all kinds of files from index cards of the 1930s, two pages within a folder from the 1970s, to one foot thick files from the 1990s. So after forty years I have become curious about the file itself. An anthropological approach seemed the best tool available in pursuing this curiosity. My anthropological approach is relatively simple and informed by the belief that such a method of exploring the world and its contents can shed new and interesting light on the small things that might tell us more about human behaviour than any quest for grand meanings can. We have not paid sufficient attention to everyday items ('artefacts' – see below) such as the file, usually in the belief that the file (or phone or diary) is just a tool for the job, yet, as I will suggest, the file, the social worker and the subject of the file, have a dynamic relationship with each other. We shape files, but files shape us. And our practice.

This is anthropology as it engages with the minutiae of everyday life. And what could be more everyday and minute than the file?

The anthropology of things

> Even if our approach to things is conditioned necessarily by the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with, the anthropological problem is that this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things. For that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories. It is only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things (Appadurai, 1986: 5).

As a guide to how we might approach a different understanding of the 'work' that a file does (and files do), I found the writing of Peter-Paul Verbeek useful. Verbeek (2005) poses the question: What do 'things' do?. His book explores 'the relations between human beings and material objects' (p. vii), and he argues that at the level of theory and reflection, materiality is often neglected (Verbeek, 2005) that is, the significance of things (p. 2). Verbeek lists the quotidian, everyday objects such as telephones, bicycles, refrigerators and argues there is a failure to take such artefacts seriously (p. 3). He draws attention to the concrete role played by artefacts, a chair for example, and argues that the role they play in human life is not 'merely anonymous and functional' (p. 30) and gives the examples of how we might be attached to an everyday object (despite its ubiquity or mass produced nature) by reason of its ability to bring forth memories or simply having been in use for a lengthy period. In summary, on artefacts: 'their mediating role cannot be entirely reduced to the intentions of their designers and users' (2005: 95).

Verbeek goes on to concentrate on the role and design of what he refers to as technical objects e.g. mobile phones, emails, the microwave oven, obstetric ultrasound, and the role concretely played by technology in human existence. He suggests that: '. . .artifacts mediate human experience by transforming perceptions and interpretive frameworks, helping to shape the way in which human beings encounter reality' (p. 195) and concludes (inter alia) that things '. . .shape the way in which people experience their world and organize their existence, regardless of whether this is done consciously and intentionally or not (2005: 217).

Verbeek is mainly concerned with our personal interactions with things and does not spend any time on human relationships to, and interactions with, things in our capacity as **professionals and in a professional context**. It is to this I now turn.

Social work and things

Phones, pens, pencils, paper, computers, diaries, desks, filing cabinets. Social workers are surrounded by and work with objects. In the words of Høybye-Mortensen, 'objects and materiality are part of casework in welfare services' (2015: 704). Yet the vast bulk of social work writing is directed to doing things

with people. Only very recently has attention been paid to the things (paraphernalia) that surround social workers and with which they work.

Mark Doel's Project 'Social work in 40 objects' signals a shift towards interest in social work's relationship to material objects. Contributions to the project include images of: a box of spanners (representing social work's tool kit approach to practice theories), an umbrella ('The umbrella can be a tool you use to help you weather that storm. It provides you with a little clarity and calmness and allows you to get to shelter'), and an ice-lolly (personally evocative of a time when the contributor was under threat and needed to appear harmless). As can be gathered, contributions range from the very personal to those that serve as metaphors and symbols for the profession. A very few include the mundane such as a computer, or mobile phone and these contributions do not address the 'thingness' of the thing in itself (Brown, 2001). Nevertheless, a shift of attention towards the things (as distinct from the words and documents – though a few of the Project's contributions consist of well-known books or significant practice guidelines) that surround social workers in their daily practice is of interest. For more on 'Social work in 40 objects' see https://socialworkin40objects.com/category/all-objects/

Høybye-Mortensen is also interested in the properties of social work's 'things', how their materiality (significance) 'reaches beyond things merely being utensils' (2015: 704). Her paper concerns the use and significance of forms, how the form and the process of its completion are drawn into interactions with client – one of her respondents talks of the assessment form structuring the interview. Høybye-Mortensen pays special attention to how the form can confer legitimacy and be used by social workers to explain the purpose of a given question or to convey the work of a higher authority in the face of client demurral. Scholar prefaces her discussion of 'the paraphernalia of practice' with the observation that unlike other professions such as medicine, social work has no visible 'tools of the trade'. Doctors have stethoscopes, nurses, have white uniforms, the legal profession has its wigs and gowns (2017: 633). When pressed to give examples of objects that convey the identity and practice of social work, her study respondents struggle to cite more than books, pens and computers. Scholar poses the question 'Can attention to the 'things' encountered in our day-to-day work add anything to our understanding of practice or our professional role and identity as social workers?' (2017: 634). Scholar reviews accounts of how material objects have featured in practice for example, the car in Ferguson's (2010) work on transporting children but with a paucity of thought on the interplay between objects and social workers, and concludes that 'Artefacts need to be noticed before they can be theorised' (Ferguson, 2010: 644). More recently, in a more mainstream approach to the use of objects to provide insight, Leigh et al. use works in clay to 'make the invisible visible' (2020: 11) in this case the experiences of social workers. And as such however, this is less concerned with the **relationship** between artefacts and social workers. The existing social work-related literature is therefore sparse and disparate. Understandably in a 'doing' profession, a seemingly inanimate everyday object such as the file can escape notice, or in the words of Scholar 'hide in plain

sight' (2017: 636). The next discussion explores the file's properties of interactivity and how these may shape behaviours of professionals, and the subjects of the files that are kept on them.

The file and social work

The file represents the official, administratively sanctioned version of a 'case'. Normally understood as just repositories of information, files are opened when mortgages and loans are applied for, when lawyers and social workers take on cases, on the first visit to the doctor. When we are born the UK's National Health Service begins a life-long file. The file's contents can be the most influential in any dispute, more influential than the spoken word, or even the written submissions or contributions of others. The latter are less privileged than the contents of the file because they are just that, not included in the file.

Prior to electronic files and folders, the file was often a bulky manila folder prominently on display. It may be thought that the physical file is a thing of the past but this is not the case. Lawyers use them, your mortgage lender holds one on you as will the legal people handling a house purchase. The local housing department will hold physical records of your tenancy history. Think of the file that faces the job applicant during an interview. Between these covers lies the accumulated information of a cv, references and notes, and by extension, authority and power. We will also be familiar with the file containing images of the crime scene that is slapped down before the suspect in the police interviewing room (and the effect that this has) in dramas. And, in relation to social work, physical records from rolodex cards to bulky files lie in basements and at the bottom of filing cabinets, Goddard (2006) refers to some social work files being 1000 pages in length. Some will have been transferred to microfiche, most not. Most social work files will be the standard Manilla, cardboard-coloured type. These are the ones that social workers have been surrounded with for over one hundred years[1]. This paper draws on my past practice as one of these social workers but also my observation of the more contemporary work of Birthlink's Care Connect Service that offers help in locating, accessing and reading files for people who have been in public care. Because the service is for adults this means that the files are about them as children and these have a physical presence, a materiality, they can be held, pages can be turned, there is a smell of twenty or thirty year old paper. In the future, those who access their records will have a different experience with electronically-maintained folders which have been introduced since the early 2000s (Information Policy Unit, 2003). However, it remains the case that the vast majority of files exist in paper form because it is only after seventy-five years that social work files for children in care may be destroyed (one hundred years for records of adoption). Therefore, alongside any of those children who have been in care who have become adults now and will be privy to their electronic records, for the foreseeable future, the physical record, the one that can be held in the hand, will still be the most commonly accessible. Indeed, recent writers have noted an **increase** in the amount

of physical material – from the adoption worker's two page assessment in 1968 to one that runs to seventy pages in 2014 (Critchley et al 2018). Before we consider The File, it must be acknowledged that the information contained in social work files has been of interest for decades. However, the written information content is only one of the entangled elements that make up a file's totality, its presence and its properties.

What this is not about

Files, or more strictly records, have been the subject of a number of papers. In social work these have been mostly about the challenges and skills involved in accessing these and interpreting the written information (Feast and Jordan, 2016; Goddard, 2006; Hayes and Devaney, 2004; Hoyle et al., 2019; MacNeil et al., 2018; O'Rourke, 2010; Prince, 1996). Garrett (2005) has explored the issues for social work that are involved in the processes of shifting from paper records to electronic ones as have Wastell and White (2014) who have pointed to the limitations of standard approaches to maintenance and use of electronic records to inform practice. However, the remainder of this paper makes the case for why we ought to be interested in the physical file itself. In the words of Katie Prince, 'it is unlikely that social workers will have received comprehensive training about the meaning of these files of information, how they function in terms of power, surveillance, communication and negotiation' (1996: x). Twenty five years later, it seems that this is still the case.

So what might be the various **properties** of a file? What does it 'do'?

The file as symbol

Just as texts serve a range of functions beyond their apparent utilitarian or formal purpose (Jackson and Stockwell 1996), so too, I suggest, does the File. On first sight it is simply a container for information. First sight that is.

Writing of records in a Kenyan hospital, Brown (2012) writes that a file becomes a metonym for the patient's identity and embodied engagement with bureaucratic procedure.

Indeed, case files produced in institutions represent a package of 'objectified knowledge' which:

> . . . stands as a product of an institutional order mediated by texts; what is known can be known in no other way . . . objectified knowledge, as we engage with it, subdues, discounts, and disqualifies our various interests, perspectives, angles and experiences, and what we might have to say, speaking from them (Smith, 1990: 80).

To be blunt, Smith's point is that if it's not in the record, it is not actionable. Practitioners are blunter: 'if it's not recorded, it hasn't happened' (Higgins et al., 2015: 331). Thus the file holds not only epistemological authority over the voices of

all those involved in its production (the authors of the various contents **and** those to whom the contents relate) but also real life events, which, if without the seeming greater authenticity of being recorded in the file (MacNeil, 2000), can be subject to dismissal, denial or vanishment. In the words of anthropologist Daniel Miller who has written extensively on the dynamics of the relationship between people and artefacts, perhaps here when we think of the power of being in the file (or not) '. . .things guide us towards the appropriate way to behave' (2010: 155). As we shall now see, such guidance may not be wholly trustworthy.

The file as unreliable narrator

What goes in the file also betokens choices. In welfare services' files, lives are read backwards or forwards depending on individual agency practice with the latest information presented first or last. Generally, most such files open on a set of biographic details. Then, a story is told in case notes, sometimes interspersed with written communications, sometimes not when these are saved for, and in, a separate section. For things to happen, services to be offered or withdrawn, decisions taken, an argument has to be made. In child protection, this is often in the form of the case for removal of a child from their parents. For something as decisive as this, there is little room for nuances, or for both sides to be put. In the file's writings, the client, partner, family, child appear only in "reported speech" (Smith, 1990: 99).

Thus stories in social work can be unconsciously curated as a detailed list of failures, weaknesses, and deficiencies (Farnfield, 2008), especially those shortcomings and failures of parents. The latter's favourite foods and films, what sports or hobbies they enjoy or are good at, how they like to wear their hair, will rarely feature in a file.

These contents, for want of a better word, assemblages, are at the discretion of the social worker and the social worker's discretion and choices are regularly determined by political, social and cultural influences which are rarely stable: 'The increases in recording appeared driven by concerns about accountability for decisions and evidencing decision-making in court. So that there are less balanced descriptions of birth families and a loss of 'soft information' as it gets 'crowded out' by 'evidence' and accounts of the decision-making process' (Critchley et al., 2018: 13). The authors go on:

> As the interviewees in this study highlighted, social work records have also become more negative about birth family in order to provide evidence in formal processes of the need for separation and permanence for the child, with a decrease in 'soft information'. Many of the 'later life letters' that featured in files demonstrated the care and warmth that social workers felt and demonstrated in their practice with birth families. For the most part the texts show that social workers knew the families and the children well. Yet symbolic and detailed representations of the small acts of affection

> within birth families became harder to find in records as the years went on (Critchley et al., 2018: 18).

Ultimately, the file is an institutional record, it also represents and symbolises authority, but it is also a document 'replete with "misinformation" and "misdirection"' (Ferguson, 2018) as we shall see later when we look at two high profile battles by ex-care people to claim their files.

The file's symbolic property is made manifest when the file is deployed as a shield. In case conferences, multi-disciplinary meetings, meetings with clients, the file – whether on the table in front or on a lap or in recourse to – betokens the file's possessor as having information, possibly knowledge but invariably authority with which comes the power of commanding attention. With fellow professionals, the possession of the file by a social worker, says "I too have parity with you and your profession", with the client, it signals the official reason for the meeting. With a supervisor, the file, especially if it looks in good order, signals efficiency and thus believed to be a symbol of good practice and professionalism.

The file as recognition

I'm on file therefore I exist. In many other walks of life, the fact of having a file on oneself can be a matter for celebration. I can be traced and reunited with a loved one. Also if I am 'on file' this can mean that the UK state recognises me as a citizen, or a doctor 400 miles away can cross-check my medication. There are also other generally much less benign meanings to having a record. A criminal record can mean access to employment is barred, the records of the former State Security Service of East Germany, (Stasi) stretch for 111 kilometres of shelves. Being on file can be both a good thing and not so much a good thing, for instance, Goffman talks of the stigmatising effect of being on file or 'being known': 'the dossier was a too powerful influence, moulding lives' (cited in Prince, 1996). In other instances having a file can be a substitute for attention: 'The family can have a file, but not a service' (Prince, 1996: 47).

The file also 'others' the person who is filed about.

Person > Client > Case > File (ang. Life)

Suspending the presence of particular subjects is the accomplishment of organized practices in and of the everyday world (Smith, 1990: 67).

The file, in Parton's phrase, renders the individual 'knowable and calculable' (2006: 258), alphabetised. My file will be in the Cs section of the cabinets. Writing about medical examinations, Foucault observes that: 'the examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them' (1977: 189).

One of the mothers in Cameron's study of their experiences of child welfare interventions comments on the file as an embodiment of her life:

> "But ah...I guess, if you're brought up in the Children's Aid...you've been in foster homes, and...maybe...you know, you're a ward with the crown, or what not. And you decide to have children when you're older. But they often think, oh...**they have your file**, they'll go back in your history...take your history, and judge you for how...or whatever... judge, and um...take that upon themselves, as some sort of ah...a thing. Like, this is how she was when she was younger, this is how she's gonna be with her children, or...you know. This will affect her children when they're older, er...when she has her children now. And, sometimes I wonder, myself too, if that's...something. Like, if it's true or not... Like, people change. We're not...like, how we used to be. Like, how is that going to have an effect on us, when we're older?" (quoted in Cameron, 2009: 85, emphasis added).

We should be cognisant of just how many of these histories exist where the word 'file' is the word 'life' re-arranged and 'my history' is 'my story'. In the words of the Access to Records Campaign Group (2016): 'It's My Journey: It's My Life!'.

People's histories are rarely more sought after than those relating to their time in care, either in children's homes, or foster care, or in adoption. There have been nearly a million adoptions in the UK since records began (National Records of Scotland, 2018; O'Halloran, 2015). Each one will have a file that prior to 2005, could not be destroyed until after seventy-five years and since then, one hundred years. The number of foster care files is harder to estimate. In 2006 Goddard conservatively estimated that '...approximately 350,000 **adults** in the UK had spent part or all of their childhood in care' (p. 111, emphasis added). If files on **children** in care were to be included as well as the files generated in the fourteen intervening years since Goddard, then we can claim the existence of hundreds of thousands of care files. Added together, there are likely to be millions of files relating to one or other form of care. There are regular efforts to obtain these files however, as mentioned above, there have been two high-profile cases that tell us something about the file itself.

Lemn Sissay, a British author and broadcaster of Ethiopian origin was the official poet of the 2012 London Olympics. For Sissay, the meaning and significance of the file(s) on him are central to his sense of identity. He was fostered as a baby then at the age of 12 sent to a series of foster homes and lock-ups until he was 18. It took him decades to gain access to his social work and foster care records, the earliest of which revealed his Ethiopian name – Sissay means 'Why' in Amharic, the language of Ethiopia – he was given the name Norman on entry to foster care (Ferguson, 2018). His autobiography *My Name is Why* outlines Sissay's campaign to retrieve his records 'the truth of his life' (Hattenstone, 2017) and it is clear that the file for him is a symbol... 'He also alludes to the fear of

the file: "...I've met a lot of people who have also received their files who say they've just put them in a drawer and can't look at them. I can understand that.'" (Huddlestone, 2019). In *My Name Is Why*, Sissay recounts poring over the contents of his file, he was at first reluctant to read it once it was in his possession and mentions 'a friend who burned her files when she received them...' (2019: 3). Although superficially bafflingly the acts of either securing your file and not reading it, or securing it and destroying it, are acts of repossession of lives that have no need of reading the file's innards. Simply owning the file and having the freedom to choose what to with it means reclaiming lost agency, taking back power just like the Borstal boy at the end of Sillitoe's *The Loneliness of The Long Distance Runner*, who at the point of winning his race, decides to lose it.

Graham Gaskin's case is much more tragic yet nevertheless echoes the marathon nature of Sissay's fight for his file. From the time he came into local authority care in 1959, Graham Gaskin experienced many moves within foster care - 14 different foster homes before the age of eight. During his 18 years in care he was sent to over 20 institutions - borstals, remand homes and prisons such as Strangeways, Wormwood Scrubs and Walton. Gaskin repeatedly but unsuccessfully sought access to his records for over ten years (at one point he was reduced to stealing his file but was compelled to hand it back) and eventually appealed to the European Court of Human Rights which decided in 1989 that his Article 8 right to have his private and family life respected by the State had been breached. The European Court also decided that people in Gaskin's position, who had been in public care as children, should not be obstructed from accessing their care records. This directly led to the provisions in the Data Protection Act 1998 which enabled access to social services records by people who had been in public care (Gaskin and MacVeigh, 2005). Gaskin's file represented 'the secrets of his life' (https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1981/nov/06/mr-graham-gaskin). Writing about the role of files relating to Australian care-leavers, Wilson and Golding observe:

> The files remain as continuing vehicles of subjection. **The mere fact of their existence** and their possible utilisation by officials, researchers and so on have such deep connotations of power and radical power imbalance as to effectively maintain, as subjective reality, the conditions of oppression that impelled their creation (2016: 96, emphasis added).

It can then be suggested that such battles for files, whether or not they result in understanding the contents, have meaning in the struggle to re-establish control over the life of someone who has been in care. If the file 'has the power to construct me' (https://sitesofresistance.org/2018/11/02/adult-care-leavers-battling-a-careless-process/) then claiming and possessing the file becomes a way of constructing a healthier version of oneself (Horrocks and Goddard, 2006) or indeed reinventing oneself. But competing claims can be made on ownership of the file.

Whose file is it?

The parent or the child's? (Prince, 1996). The Agency's? The Individual Worker's? Admin.? When files are available to anyone in the same shared office space or room, ownership and access become entangled without ever the file being so accessible to the person or persons in whose name it has been opened. In connection with the last point, the subject(s) of files can be altered. Richardson's personal reflective account of being involved in a child protection investigation concludes '... whom the file actually belongs to requires clarification. The Ombudsman initially referred to the file as my 'daughter's file', but social services now state that it is a 'family' file'' (2003: 131). Thus the file is the property of the agency and as such it can be argued that it is an instrument of one of Foucault's institutions. Satka and Skehill argue that:

> ... power is neither the intentional thought of a social worker nor a result of her internalized discipline. Instead a social worker, who is writing a case file note, participates in a discourse in an agent position in the relations of ruling and institutional order of child protection. Discourse creates agent positions (or locations) and particular performances for different agents like social worker, mother, child, etc. in a practice encounter. A subject position is thus defined by discourse and other relations of ruling and involves power, e.g. in the case of a social worker, power to objectify, name and displace other forms of knowledge (2012: 197).

And hence 'the detritus of power enters unseen into the theoretical formulations of professional discourse' (Smith, 1990: 93) and then passes equally unseen into practice. Although this paper is about the file itself and its properties, it now pays to consider not so much the written information in a file, but what is allowed into it, or not, how this is arranged, and how the file, though hidden in plain sight, might shape practice.

The file opened

Hamilton and Harris, writing about archives, suggest that: '[the archive] ... is in dynamic relationship with its physical environment; organizational dynamics are ever shifting; and the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses ...' (2002: 7). The same can be applied to the file in that its power and significance alters not only with those who possess access to it, but also when that access takes place and the files comes into the hands of its subject. Like Sissay and Gaskin and all the others, the file may become neutered, de-fanged and less important than when it was withheld, but also once in possession by the subject, second and third and more readings may further diminish its power.

But readings depend on comprehension. Aside from the language of child protection, especially the shorthand (NAI, RIC, JLO, LAC), all the writing in UK social work files is in English. Prince (1996) draws attention to the problem of

meaningless availability of access when the client or clients do not have English as their first language[2]. The reliance on the written word is understandable when decisions about life or limb or child removal are concerned, however this aside, the absence of images, drawings and other visuals could be said to betoken a particularly mono-cultural form of recording. As long ago as 1981, Bywaters drew attention to the value of diagrams and pictures in files (cited in Prince, 1996: 14). Critchley et al's discussion of Scottish adoption records recounts one experienced adoption worker regretting the absence of 'soft information' (Extract from research interview, 2018: 5). Pugh quotes one care-leaver: "I wanted nitty-gritty. I wanted photos and bills and all the minutiae that made it real. I wanted my reports and I wanted to see my handwriting" (1999: 74). Amongst other lacunae, Brandon et al. (2017) have noted not only accounts of fathers, but also the ethnicity of those fathers that were present in the records that they studied.

No discussion of the nature of the file's contents would be complete without a note relating to the **order** in which these are arranged. Files can be set up to be read from either the front to the back, that is on the one hand, when opening the file, the first thing that will be seen is the earliest or oldest record, and on the other hand, if contents are arranged from back to front, then the first thing read will be the latest event or incident. Thus under critical scrutiny, even the arrangement of the contents can be problematized. In her study of child protection risk assessment processes, Munro draws attention to a failure to appreciate '...past information'... and '...a picture of professionals becoming absorbed in present-day issues' (1999: 751). It is suggested that in the organisation of the file's contents, if this is done from the front of the file (latest) to the back (earliest), then a full assessment of risk will be dominated and skewed by attention to the present-day to the detriment of a holistic understanding.[3]

File closed

Even when closed the file remains 'a perpetual memento of the official gaze' (Wilson and Golding, 2016: 93).

Worse still, a file may 'come to life again' in its embodiment of organisational power, in the case when an old file closed for years is re-opened. Closing a file is not a straightforward administrative or technical act. Closing a file (and re-opening the same file) is a matter for professional judgement, and the exercise of values and power. Within the agency, the act of closing a file is symbolic of job done, and usually rarely a collaborative act involving the file's latest possessor and its subject. Some people are unaware that their file has been closed. Reopening a file is also an exercise in discretion and therefore power, that is, how long should a file have been closed before the information contained within is irrelevant? Or at least considered worth verifying. A young man recorded as angry may not always be so. Brandon et al. quote a social worker to this effect:

> "I think sometimes a man who has been violent or who has got a criminal record for being violent, that can, overshadow the whole case and overshadow your assessment of their parenting rather than you know dealing with, looking, digging through it and looking at it in a kind of more holistic way" (2017: 93).

Or is everything always potentially relevant? The file's very existence offers the allure of prior information (which may of course, be very relevant). The point is that the file's very existence signals 'previous' as in previous social work involvement - with all that comes with that.

This dynamic potential of the file with its life open and closed and afterlife, underlines its mutable, shape-shifting nature. This is especially clear, in the anthropomorphic terms in which the file is spoken of, e.g. Wilson and Golding speak of the file inflicting pain (ibid) and this is evident elsewhere where files 'speak', they give answers (Goddard, 2006) and testify.

Open or closed, visible or hidden in plain sight, the File is always on active service.

Concluding thoughts

If a question well put is one that is half answered, I hope that this paper has placed the File in a clear spotlight and made the file 'strange' enough. I began with Verbeek's helpful approach to things and his concluding remarks are also a useful way to end this food for thought piece. Verbeek writes about technological and design products but his comments seem applicable to files: 'When only the functionality of products takes center stage, we are merely involved with what products *do* and not with *how* they do it . . . things help to shape the way in which human beings are involved with their world and interpret it . . . it is not only people but also things who give answers to the classical moral question, "How to live?"' (2006: 232–236, emphasis in original). Careful study of the File in Social Work, the dynamics of the relationship between practice and the file, and how these play out with those who use the service, might answer the question "How to practice well".

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Notes

1. A leading forerunner of modern social work, The Charity Organisation Society, was founded in 1896 and over two thousand files are retained in its archives.

2. This point applies to anywhere in the world where records are kept in the majority language of the country.
3. This is not the place to delve into the intricacies of document analysis (see Hodder, 2012 for an introduction to this), however the writing in a social work file can range between copper-plate style of longhand and scribbled case notes, and handwritten or typed reports, the older ones with errors 'tippexed' out. All of which offer a rich mine of interpretation that may extend beyond the intended meaning of the succession of various contributors whose views make up the file's content.

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